

Artist Profile – Azra Aghighi Bakhshayeshi

Azra Aghighi Bakhshayeshi was born in 1968 to a religious family in Qom, Iran. Her father is a writer and historian of Islam publishing more than 40 books. Her mother's side comes from Mirza Karim Khoshnevis Tabhari, a famous court Calligrapher. The family still owns a hand-written Koran by him. Aghighi was raised in a family where the importance of religion and arts were her first influences. She studied graphic design and Master [Nasrollah] Afjai introduced her to the art of Calligraphy. Aghighi is one of the only women in Middle East with training and qualifications to pursue a career in the calligraphic arts. She lives with her husband and two daughters and works in Tehran.

How did you get started with Calligraphy?

I grew up with books for as long back as I can remember. For the past four decades, my father has been a publisher in Science of Religion in Qom. Calligraphy was inherited in our family from my mother side. Together, this was what initially attracted me to Calligraphy. At the age of 12, I started working with Master Vaziri. Four years later, before finishing high school, I received an Excellency Prize at age of 16 from the Federations of Calligraphers. At that moment, it was the beauty and variations of Persian letters that fascinated me. Seeking to understand the logotype brought me to graphics and I continued my studies of contemporary Calligraphy scientifically. Master Afjai was my teacher at the University and for my Bachelor Degree's thesis I chose the Kufi script and its variations. *Kufi* writing seems to be one of the most formal writings in the world. Persian-style *Kufi* script has a minimalist feature to its writing and because I am not seeking literary expressions by Calligraphy, it suits my style.

What sort of training did you receive? Who have been your teachers? I have read that the pupil-teacher relationship lasts a lifetime. Does this still apply to your contemporary practice? Can you explain this relationship in greater depth?

The first art teacher has a very special place for us. I started my journey with Master Nozari in Qom followed by Master [Qolam-Hussein] Amirkhani but the contemporary inspirations came to my work when I met Master [Nasrollah] Afjai in 1991. During this process I discovered the artistic expressions available through Calligraphy. The more I work the more doors opens to me. I am proud to continue consulting and collaborating with Master Afjai.

What calligraphic script or scripts do you use?

Each Persian or Arabic letter has their own qualities and beauties. For example I know *Nas'taligh* the official administrating script very well but I am more attached to the *Kufi* script. I consider myself as a "Painters Scribe" of Persian *Kufi* script. This is my personal view since *Nas'taligh* has not given me the inspiration, freedom and creativity that I get with *Kufi* writing.

Traditionally, there have been less women Calligraphers than men. Do you find that more women are now studying the art of Calligraphy? Do you find that contemporary audiences in Iran and abroad look at you differently because you are a woman Calligrapher?

Let us ask why women have become more successful or more professional in this field? There are 1500 women in Iran with a skill level measured at an excellent level of writing. This is an unusually high number within the whole of the Islamic world. I learned this when I participated at the Festival of Women Calligraphers in Istanbul. I understand how Iranian women Calligraphers are ahead of other Muslim countries. But at the same time, I sadly realized that I am the only professional calligraphic woman artist in Iran. I do not claim my works are unique but can say that I am the first woman using conceptual calligraphic writing as an art form.

Your CV mentions that you have been involved publishing a book about Women Calligraphers. What did you learn about women's calligraphic history? How are things changing?

My research shows the first woman Calligrapher was the daughter of Ibne Moghna in 11th century and she was taught by her father. The number of women Calligraphers is low up until the 13th and 14th century. There were 30 women Calligrapher in Iran during 19th century however I limited my research only to Calligraphy in Iran due to the scholarship and research materials. After modernism in Iran we saw more Women Poets, Artists, and Scientists.

Do you foresee that this book would be translated into English?

This book was for Persian readers. Translating it to other languages requires extra work for descriptions and explanations. But, it has all the academic research necessary, so why not?

How do you begin your producing your works?

I start my work studying the letters first like a mental scan. Then I follow with a sketch or drawing with a pencil to build the atmosphere. I work in blocks of 10x10. Then I use my Calligraphy pens and ink. I chose my material and colors according to the drawings.

What stories/poems inspire you? Who are the most immediate influences regarding the form and content of your work?

I have never thought about this question much before. I think my religious feelings in my work reveal my inner feelings however, this is not my intention to pass it on to the viewer. For me, these are very personal feelings. Seeing the Islamic writings of first centuries has touched my soul deeply.

Who are you mentors?

Master [Mohammed] Ehsai and [Farararz] Pilaram have inspired me the most. I did not meet Master Pilaram while he was alive but I see him as my mentor nevertheless.

For people in the West who can not read the Persian texts, what do you want the viewer to come away with – in terms of message, or ideas?

I am delighted they appreciate my work and hope they can see that it is a contemporary artistic work. I am trying to show the viewer that my artistic inspiration continues to be part of a rich heritage from the golden treasure of Middle Eastern culture.

Why do you think Calligraphy has such an impact on people who do not understand its meaning?

When viewers do not understand the meaning they are not reading the letters. I am looking for viewers who are seeing and not reading. These writings are whispers in my mind that do not mean too much, like a meditation. Some times they could be poetry, prayers, or just a conversation. I am not trying to convey spirituality with my writings. Speaking only one language creates a barrier between me and the viewer if they do not speak the same language. I am hoping to reach out to a broader audience with my art as a universal message.

Do you think Persian Calligraphy has a sort of universal appeal?

Yes, of course. Is Calligraphy visual? Yes. Does it matter in what shape and form it is presented? No, because beauty has a universal appeal and no one should be deprived of beauty.

What are the next projects that you will be involved in?

I am not thinking about it right now. I live in present.